Parenthood ideologies and leave practices among Belgian fathers: a typology of parental leave perspectives for Belgian men

Reference:
Community, work & family - ISSN 1366-8803 - 26:2(2023), p. 151-169
Full text (Publisher's DOI): https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2021.1957779
To cite this reference: https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1795570151162165141
Parenthood ideologies and leave practices among Belgian Fathers. A typology of parental leave perspectives for Belgian men

Dries Van Gasse
Jonas Wood
Cécile Verdonck

Abstract (200 words)
This study focuses on the role of parenthood ideologies on the micro and meso level as individual determinants to take up parental leave among fathers in Belgium. Belgian parental leave policies are characterized by a "laisser faire" mentality regarding the division of parental leave uptake. Based on in-depth interviews with 20 heterosexual couples our study highlights the impact of norms and values on the individual micro-level and social expectations on a contextual meso-level. We present six ideal-typical categories of fathers’ position towards the uptake of parental leave that are defined by synergies or conflicts between parenthood ideologies on different levels and are ultimately likely to determine the individual decision to take up parental leave. The six positions are: empowered parental leave takers, ideological crusaders, ideological renegades, ideological breadwinners, ideological explorers and empowered breadwinners.

Keywords: Parental Leave – Fatherhood – Belgium – Qualitative Research – Couples

Word count without references: 6446

The version of record of this manuscript has been published and is available in Community, Work & Family, 27/07/2021
http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13668803.2021.1957779
Introduction

Although Western European countries have witnessed unprecedented surges in female employment and the rise of the dual-earner model, the shift towards gender equality in the labour force remains incomplete, as the overwhelming majority of parental leave is used by mothers (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegard, 2015; Marynissen, Mussino, Wood, & Duvander, 2019; Wood & Marynissen, 2019). Policy-makers have raised increased male parental-leave uptake as an explicit policy goal, as fathers’ leave use would entail multiple micro-, meso- and macro-level dividends. First, at individual and couple levels, fathers’ leave uptake increases their involvement in caretaking activities (Bünning, 2015), potentially supports child development (Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011), furthers gender equality in the division of (un)paid labour (Bünning, 2015) and may safeguard women’s labour-force attachment, financial independence and welfare. Moreover, regarding intergenerational transmission of gender roles, involved fathers provide “desirable” examples for children’s gender attitudes in later life (Platt & Polavieja, 2016). Second, male parental-leave usage is quintessential to convert traditionally male-oriented workplace cultures into organisational settings supportive to the complementary (yet sometimes competing) roles of employees and parents (Samtleben, Bringmann, Bünning, & Hipp, 2019). Third, on a larger scale, fathers’ use of leave is likely to prevent women’s labour-force exits and safeguard labour supply among an aging population and declining labour market entrants. Increasing policy attention towards fathers’ leave uptake emerged along with a growing yet inconclusive body of research assessing determinants for male leave uptake. This study answers the research question, “How does parenthood ideology at the micro and meso levels affect the (lack of) uptake of male parental leave in Belgium on different levels?” Investigating this question contributes to three important factors of evolution in our understanding of fathers’ parental leave decisions.

First, an in-depth understanding of the myriad of factors influencing fathers’ leave decisions typically hinges on the exploitation of various types of data. These include large-scale administrative data with highly reliable indicators of officially registered characteristics (e.g., labour market positions), survey data providing information on a broader range of possible determinants (e.g., preferences and attitudes) for a smaller sample and qualitative approaches that contribute a richer description of the decision-making process. Qualitative approaches allow one to study all potential determinants within the consciousness of the fathers considered. Although fathers’ uptake of parental leave can be seen as a relatively new strand of research (Birkett & Forbes, 2019), scholars have recently highlighted the fact that the majority of
quantitative research on fathers’ leave uptake and its determinants tends to overshadow a smaller body of in-depth qualitative studies focusing on how fathers make this in relation to their partners, employers, peers and the policy context (Kaufman, 2018; Marynissen et al., 2019; Wood & Marynissen, 2019). In line with O’Brien and Wall (2017), we argue that empirical research on specific experiences whilst taking leave – and male experiences or gender dynamics in particular – remain understudied.

Second, this study considers how synergies and conflicts between parenthood ideologies on different levels affect male decision-making regarding parental leave. Parenthood ideologies – the norms and values prescribing socially constructed fathering behaviour (Johansson & Klinth, 2008) – form implicit frames on various levels impacting male parental leave uptake. The idea that ideological positioning affects decision-making on male parental leave is embedded in various studies. On a micro level, studies document how attitudes towards involved fathering (Coles, Hewitt, & Martin, 2017; Wall & Arnold, 2007a), parenthood values (Duvander, 2014; Glauber & Gozjolko, 2011) or “doing gender” impact decisions to take parental leave (Brandth & Kvande, 2016b; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). On the meso level, a difference is observed between family-friendly workplaces empowering men to take parental leave (Bächmann, Frodermann, & Müller, 2020) and work-centred workplaces discouraging men’s leave-taking intentions (Samtleben et al., 2019). Although parenthood ideology components on various levels are studied in relation to fathers’ leave uptake, the interaction between levels has received less attention (Hojgaard, 1997). This perspective can help us understand how parental leave uptake may be improved through supportive synergies on various levels. Therefore, we include a particular focus on fathers’ positions when confronted with conflicting parenthood ideologies on the micro and meso levels.

Third, despite the availability of some qualitative studies on the determinants of male leave-taking in the UK (e.g., Kaufman, 2018), Canada (e.g., McKay and Doucet, 2010), Spain (e.g., Meil, Romero-Balsas, & Rogero-García, 2017), Portugal (Wall & Leitão, 2017), Switzerland (Valarino, 2017) and Japan (Nakazato, 2017), qualitative research on fathers’ parental leave uptake considers Nordic countries more often than not. These countries include Norway (many contributions by Brandth & Kvande, 2019a), Sweden (Duvander, Haas, & Thalberg, 2017; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017), Finland (Lammi-Taskula, 2017) and Denmark (Bloksgaard, 2015). This paper adds to the literature on fathers’ leave uptake in non-Nordic European countries by focussing on the Belgian case, which exhibits an interesting combination of strong work–family reconciliation policies, approximating the support in Scandinavian
countries, but also a laissez-faire approach to gender equality in the combination of work and family and particularly leave uptake, unlike Nordic countries (Marynissen et al., 2019; Saxonberg, 2013).

In this paper, we first introduce parenthood ideology at various levels. Thereafter, we look into the presence of the parenthood ideologies at various levels in the qualitative in-depth interviews we collected with Belgian couples. Ultimately, we develop a typology in which individual fathers find themselves in their parental leave-taking process.

The multilevel nature of male parent ideology and its impact on parental leave decisions

Day-to-day practices of parents (role performances) have been described as doing fatherhood and doing motherhood (Herbst-Debby, 2018). This conceptualization is based on the general theory of doing gender, describing that gendered behaviour is often influenced by socially constructed prescripts (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These prescripts are backed by a cognitive framework representing a set of norms and values regarding gender roles, which we call gender ideologies (Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Vespa, 2009). Hence, a transposition similar to the definition of gender ideologies though doing gender takes place regarding doing fatherhood and doing motherhood. Parenthood ideologies are seen as the norms and values prescribing socially constructed parenting behaviour (Endendijk, Derks, & Mesman, 2018; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). According to Hojgaard (1997), these differences should be understood on three levels: (1) the macro level, which is the institutional level of the state, (2) the meso level, i.e., workplace interactions and (3) the micro level, including individual perceptions on parenthood ideologies. Although the impact of policy decisions on the macro level should not be neglected, this level is difficult to study in a single country. Therefore, we focus mainly on the micro and meso levels.

Parenthood ideology and parental leave uptake on a micro level

Micro-level parenthood ideologies refer to the individual perceptions of doing parenthood embedded in an introjected social role (e.g., financial provider or emotional support) (Glauber and Gozjolko, 2011). As previous research has shown that individual ideologies impact other decisions, we can expect that parenthood ideology determines parental leave uptake to some extent (Johansson and Klinth, 2008). Research by Petts, Carlson and Knoester (2020) even indicates that men experience insecurities about their own masculinity
and relationship stability when opting for paternity leave, despite proven improved relationship strength.

Moreover, micro-level parenthood ideologies reflect the balance between work-related norms and values and parenthood-related norms and values. In particular, research on men shows that the decision (not) to take parental leave seems to be a struggle between an individual’s intentions to be an involved father and a work-centred attitude (Bloksgaard, 2015; Hojgaard, 1997). Consequently, barriers for men to take parental leave are often related to their worker identity and work-centred attitudes (Nätti, Anttila, & Tammelin, 2011). The discontinuity of a personal career and its consequences is, by far, the best documented barrier on an individual level (Byun & Won, 2020; Reimer, 2020). However, involved fathering intentions seem to be strong motivations to take parental leave (Ladge, Humberd, & McNett, 2016). Hence, both sets of values (work values and fathering values) may be discrepant, representing conflicting interests. Therefore, traditional fathers who prioritise work above family (i.e., perceiving their family role as breadwinner) differ from more progressive fathers for whom both work and family values are equally important, or even family-centred men (Wall, Aboim, & Marinho, 2007).

Parenthood ideology and parental leave uptake on a meso level

The meso level is the interactional level at which an individual is influenced by the expectations of the environment on parenthood. With respect to workplaces, literature indicates that not only organizational features (such as firm-specific leave arrangements) but also the behaviour of all involved actors (such as peers, managers and employers) vary in the degree of support or restrictiveness towards their employees wishing to take parental leave (Callan, 2007). A firm’s normative frame has been argued to be deeply rooted in organizations, as managers are reluctant to change routines from their predecessors (Campuzano, 2019). Organizations with leaders who have advocated parental leave in the past are therefore seen as frontrunners regarding work–life policies, as these ideals are more difficult to change.

Parenthood ideologies at the workplace level are expected to affect fathers’ leave-taking decisions in at least two ways. First, workplace demands have been documented to impact men’s decision-making on family-related activities (Kulik, 2019; Smoktunowicz, Cieslak, & Demerouti, 2017). It is likely that organisations with high workplace demands – particularly contexts in which colleagues are overburdened when parental leave is taken (Haas and Hwang, 2019; Holmes et al., 2020) – also entail high role expectations connected to the social role of
the ideal worker. In such a context, perceived opposition to leave-taking, anticipated negative signalling effects and stigmatisation have been put forward as barriers to male parental leave uptake (Haas and Hwang, 2009; Ladge et al., 2015; McKay and Doucet, 2010). Second, besides the sheer workplace demands, organisations vary in the degree to which they respond to work–family conflicts to accommodate more involved parenthood roles for their employees (Bächmann et al., 2020; Callan, 2007). Organisations providing flexitime and/or flexiplace arrangements for instance are considered family-friendly (Bächmann et al., 2020; Callan, 2007; Strachan & Burgess, 1998). This concept of family friendliness embeds parenthood ideology. Some organizations hold on to stern organizations of work, assuming uninvolved parenting and a work-centred attitude (Humberd, Ladge, & Harrington, 2015; Ladge, Humberd, Watkins, & Harrington, 2015). However, family-friendly employers look to accommodate the employees’ needs and respect the privacy of their employees’ involved parenting roles, which is assumed to also facilitate fathers’ uptake of parental leave. Fusulier (2008) proposed a typology in companies, given the large variations in parental leave uptake in Belgian firms: proactive companies take measures to activate family-oriented rights hence promoting as articulation between working and family life. Simply legalist companies, forming the largest group of firms, enable people to take up their rights when they are willing to do so; reluctant firms reflect an institutionalised reluctance to support employees in utilizing their rights.

The policy context in Belgium

In this section we describe the Belgian policy context for parental leave-taking. Although this article does not focus on the influence of policies, this facet is needed to understand the leave-taking discourse in country-specific regulations. We first develop why family policies have an impact on leave taking. Thereafter, we address how Belgian family policies can be situated in this respect.

Family policies have an evident impact on leave-taking. Several specific features in the design of parental leave have been suggested to affect parents parenting ideology and fathers’ leave uptake. First, the available literature—mostly focussing on Scandinavian countries (Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Eerola et al., 2019), but too some extent also for other countries (McKay & Doucet, 2010; Miller, 2013) - indicates that the provision of earmarked, non-transferable leave for fathers increases their sense of entitlement or even duty and hence entices a more fatherhood ideology in which active involvement in childrearing stands central and entitlement legitimizes leave requests towards supervisors (McKay & Doucet, 2010).
Second, in addition to the financial impact of the level of parental leave benefits on leave decisions, higher benefits may also stimulate fathers’ sense of entitlement as generous benefits. They may perceive these benefits as a signal that parental leave policies also target mainly earning parents. Third, the length of parental leave available to fathers—through quota but also extra-statutory entitlements—has also been identified as a conversion factor positively affecting fathers’ senses of entitlement and capabilities to take leave (Alison Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). Fourth, the role of flexibility is ambiguous as flexible parental leave schemes have, on the one hand, been suggested to facilitate work-family combinations and involved fatherhood. On the other hand, they have also have been claimed to confirm fathers as secondary earners instead of empowering equivalent fatherhood and motherhood ideologies (Brandth & Kvande, 2016a).

The Belgian policy setup is characterised by strong degenderizing outsourcing policies such as formal childcare availability (OECD, 2019), but also a parental leave system which has been labelled “explicitly genderizing” (Saxonberg, 2013). Although parental leave is a legal entitlement for mothers and fathers linked to employment in the public sector (conditional on having an employment contract) and in the private sector (conditional on having worked at least 12 months for the current employer in the last 15 months prior to application), the relatively low flat rate benefit, the short duration and flexibility are factors which might discourage fathers from the taking leave, thus involving them more in parenthood ideologies (Saxonberg, 2013). The amount and duration of parental leave a parent is entitled to take up varies according to the degree of reduction in working hours: 100% for a maximum of 4 months; 50% for up to 8 months; or 20% limited to 16 months, which is the most popular option, particularly among fathers (Mortelmans & Fusulier, 2020). Recently, it has also been possible to take up 10%, up to 32 months. Parents are allowed to split the leave period, depending on the sector of employment and previous work history. Moreover, leave can be used until the child is 12 years old. For higher paid-leave schemes, fathers have a right to 10 days of paternity leave starting from the birth of the child, whereas maternity leave amounts to 15 weeks.

Methods

We collected 20 semi-structured interviews with Belgian parenting couples. All respondents formed a cohabiting, heterosexual couple with at least one child under the upper

---

1 The benefit level for 2020 amounted to €750.33 per month after taxation (€834.90 before taxation).
age limit for the use of parental leave (Age < 12), in which both partners are employed at least part-time. Hence, the age of the child being below the age of 12 was a criterion to participate. Eventually all youngest children were below the age of 6. In addition, we only included couples without a migration background, as previous research has shown substantially different leave-taking patterns among migrant groups (Kil et al, 2018). Within the research population, there were 15 couples in which the father took parental leave and 5 in which the father did not. Both partners were present in the same interview; no partners were interviewed separately.

We used a snowball sampling method to find participants for the study (Noy, 2008). Participants for in-depth interviews were selected by first relying on the professional network of the researchers for seed contacts and then applying a snowball sampling method. For theoretical reasons, the characteristics of the research population were relatively homogeneous in two respects. As some researchers have put forward strict eligibility criteria and low income as major constraints to parental leave decisions (Kil, Wood, & Neels, 2018; McKay & Doucet, 2010), we chose to focus on a group that we expected to be less limited by these factors in their decisions so that other drivers and dynamics could be mapped. As a result, most of our respondents had middle to high educational qualifications. More specifically, the monthly family income of the interviewees ranged between 2200 and 6000 euros after taxes, with the Belgian poverty threshold at 2279 euros. This implies that there was only one case slightly below the poverty threshold. All respondents were employed at least half time at the time of the interview, which makes it unlikely that leave decisions were dominated by eligibility criteria. Despite the homogeneity in terms of employment status and, to a lesser extent, educational qualifications, the research population exhibits considerable variations with respect to work environment, social background and variations in family income. An overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents using pseudonyms can be consulted in table 1.

In the interviews, we retrospectively asked about the participant’s approach to becoming a parent and negotiations for taking parental leave. This allowed us to read the interviews systematically and identify recurring themes. The interview themes included motivations to take parental leave, the barriers encountered on the way, gender ideals about parental leave and struggles for information. The work-context was questioned as well, asking questions specifically focussing on reactions and support in the workplace regarding parental leave. The questions about parental leave referred to the decision-making process and
negotiations with partners and employers about parental leave to care for one or more children. The youngest children in our research sample were all between 0 and 6 years of age. We transcribed all interviews after their completion then analysed them using an approach inspired by Grounded Theory Research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is an inductive way to build theories in which newly crafted theories emerge from in-depth analysis on the data (Glaser, 2002). We used open and axial coding to derive a conceptual framework for performing initial theory building. We systematically coded until we reached theoretical saturation.

Coding practice was oriented in a thematic way towards reasoning on the micro- meso- and macro-level as sensitizing concepts from the literature. Sensitized concepts are theoretically derived; they helped us to put the arguments of the respondents in a theoretical perspective (Hoare, Mills, & Francis, 2012). In its essence, the use of sensitizing concepts is, as Hoare et al. (2012) state, a way to define the emerging theory from the start in an existing theoretical framework (Thornberg, 2012).

In particular, we used the following concepts in the coding process: involved fathering (micro), male breadwinner ideology (micro), work centredness (micro), family centredness (micro), family friendly workplaces (meso), traditional worker norms (meso), work centeredness (meso).

After identifying the different drivers through open and axial coding, we investigated the internal dynamics looking for conflicting positions (e.g. conflicting positions on a micro- and meso-level) to develop an ideally typical structure for the position of fathers in their personal parenthood ideology and at the workplace.

**Insert Table 1 Here**

## Results

We studied the dynamics behind male parental leave on two levels: the individual micro-level and the interactional meso-level. Doing this, we developed a typology based on the variations in these two levels as presented in figure 1 on two axes. On a micro-level, the personal parenthood ideology is envisioned, as well as the partners’ parenthood ideology. On a meso-level, dimensions of workplace culture come into play, impacting the feasibility of living up to the parenthood ideology on the micro-level. In contrast, micro-level ideologies may challenge the feasibility of living up to the norms of the workplace. Hence, both levels impact
the position of individuals regarding male parental leave. Therefore, we documented six ideal-typical positions in which individual men may be situated: empowered leave takers, ideological crusaders, ideological renegades, ideological explorers, ideological breadwinners and empowered breadwinners.

**INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

**A typology using two axis of parenthood ideology**

The typology we develop is based on variations across two axis situating individuals in their perspective towards parental leave.

One axis entail the micro-level, individual parenthood ideologies. The individual ideology can be oriented to involved parenting or oriented towards breadwinning. The interview data indicate that parents’ views on parenting and especially on the fathering role of young fathers define the motivations to take leave. Breadwinning fathers consider their parental roles to be more traditional—financial breadwinning—whereas involved fathers strive for more involvement in child rearing, perceiving childrearing as a crucial and defining element of fatherhood.

Laurie: It’s fairly traditional here

Lenny: The first time, I used my leave to renovate the house and the second time, I used it to go to the store, and I cooked once a week but nothing more (laughter).

(Laurie, F and Lenny, M, breadwinner ideology)

The other axis entails the meso-level, interactional parenthood ideologies. In this case, we mainly focus on whether the workplace context is supportive or unsupportive towards parental leave uptake. Parenthood ideology can either be institutionalized in rules supporting either an involved fathering ideology or a male breadwinner ideology or norms and values can be latently rooted within the organization advocating an involved fathering or male breadwinning ideology, resulting in more work-centred or family-centred attitudes. Through the narratives of our interviewees, we found that organizations supporting an involved fathering ideology seemed to be more open to helping their male employees take parental leave. Different from family friendly firms, there are organizations embodying a more conservative gender ideology. For respondents working in such an organization, it was more difficult to find the information and peculiarities regarding parental leave. Respondents working
in such organizations reported feeling less supported and experiencing a generally perceived rejection regarding parental leave. Remarkable in the narratives of the interviewees is that they usually referred to a perceived disapproval regarding parental leave because of the minimal information to be found on the possibilities.

Geri: It was difficult for me to ask for it as I only worked there for a year and a half, and there was no information whatsoever. So at the beginning, I was not inclined to think about parental leave. It was only in the last half year that I really needed to find a practical solution. (Geri, M)

Positions in the Parental leave typology - Synergies and incompatibilities on different levels

Our results show that the decision-making regarding male parental leave is driven by parenthood ideologies on different levels. Whereas workplaces should ideally support the individual parenthood ideology, values may be incompatible as well. Therefore, we distinguish six ideal-typical\(^2\) cases: empowered parental leave takers, ideological crusaders, ideological renegades, ideological breadwinners, ideological explorers and empowered breadwinners.

Empowered parental leave takers

A first type of fathers are the *empowered parental leave takers*. These fathers find themselves on the involved fathering side of the spectrum both on the micro- as on the meso-level.

On a micro-level, empowered parental leave takers can be described as involved fathers that strive for more involvement in child rearing, perceiving childrearing as a crucial and defining element of fatherhood. Involvement of the father in childrearing processes was expressed as an important aspect of the fathering role.

Al: I look forward to connecting with her. I always think the first year is nice and cute but also quite repetitive. The moment you can communicate with your child [...] that’s where I look forward to. I do live towards that moment of forming a personal connection. (Al, M)

\(^2\) The use of idealtypes implies that these cases are usually unrealistic, given a more moderate presence in everyday life.
On a meso-level, empowered parental leave takers work in a context that supports them and facilitates parental leave uptake. Organizations supporting an involved fathering ideology seemed to be more open to helping their male employees take parental leave. Both managers as colleagues may play a role in the cultivation of this family friendliness. As such, colleagues might perceive the use of parental leave as a valuable resource in the transition to parenthood with a management allowing and supporting it. Therefore, the collegial perceptions also reflect norms and values in the organization and affect decision-making as well.

Buzz: The manager helped me enormously, telling me to take the benefit to the maximum as it was my right. She informed me about all the different constellations, or types... It seemed so natural. I immediately asked whether it would affect my jo, because I would be unavailable for a day in the week [respondent had 1/5 parental leave] but she was very positive to me. (Buzz, M)

Hence, the personal norms and values of parental leave takers are supported by a family friendly workplace, facilitating the taking of parental leave. The resonance between norms and values on the personal micro level and the interactional meso level makes this set of fathers a distinct category from other fathers as they do not face any conflict when aiming to take parental leave. In interaction between the personal micro-level and the interactional meso-level there is no conflict causing strain in the decision making. The micro-level parenthood ideology is performative, i.e. the ideal-typical empowered parental leave takers are not the only ones taking their entitled leave; they also spend this leave in a nurturing, supportive role.

Buzz: I thought it would be best to use parental leave at this stage because I can help in the household and give the support my family needs (...) My employer was a huge help and supported this. She explained all the different systems (...) that helped because on my own it all seemed really complex. (Buzz, M, empowered parental leave taker)

Ideological crusaders and Ideological renegades

A second category of fathers are those who do experience conflict between the micro-level and the interactional meso-level. We distinguish two types based on the decision that is ultimately taken. Ideological crusaders and ideological renegades are essentially people finding themselves at a conflicted intersection between an involved fathering ideology on the micro-level and an unsupportive work environment on the meso-level. Similar to empowered parental
leave takers, fathers in these categories have the personal intention to be an involved father. Hence, both categories experience strain due to conflict in their micro- and meso-level, but they act differently. Whereas ideological crusaders choose to let their personal ideologies prime above the ideology advocated by the workplace, ideological renegades pander to the parenthood ideology on the meso-level and don’t take leave. Hence, ideological crusaders do perform their parenthood ideology by taking parental leave, while ideological renegades are strained by meso-level expectations. In both cases, a conflict arises between the personally desirable role of involved father and the expected role of employee.

Shane: I am totally into the idea of the ideal man. If Christina would say: ‘I would like to work fulltime, I’m bored of sitting home, I would gladly work parttime […] but I did experience the reaction of my manager (ed. When he announced taking parental leave) as disappointed because I didn’t pursued a career enough (Shane, M, Ideological Crusader)

Douglas: (ed. when I took parental leave) many colleagues told me that they didn’t take parental leave or they didn’t dare to ask to take it. When those people assure me, I know they probably would have wanted to do the same. (Douglas, M, referring to ideological renegades)

In these categories, the interactional meso-level presents itself as a hurdle to take up parental leave. Some organizations embody a more conservative gender ideology that challenges people to take up parental leave. An exemplary hurdle for respondents in such organization were the difficulties to inform themselves on the peculiarities regarding parental leave uptake. Respondents working in such organizations reported feeling less supported and experiencing a generally perceived rejection regarding parental leave.

Geri: No one did it or took it, it was not presented as a possibility, although I now know that it is an entitled right. You really had to look for it yourself and that raises the perception that it was only something for some ‘special cases’ (Geri, M)

The ultimate decision ideological crusaders and ideological renegades make differs. Whereas ideological crusaders perform their personal ideology and challenge the existing norms and values in their organization, ideological renegades supress their desire to take up parental leave and have to find other ways to express their involved fathering attitude.
Karl: I am no gamechanger at work, but I envy people who do take up parental leave. I sometimes think I miss out on things, but I would have that feeling as well when I stay at home... (Karl, M)

Ideological breadwinners and ideological explorers

A third category of fathers who also experience a conflict between the micro- and meso-level, but instead of an involved fathering attitude on the micro-level, these fathers have a breadwinning ideology on the micro-level but find support to take parental leave on the meso-level.

Andy: In my opinion, being a parent and running the household are two separate things (...) a contribution to the household can be just financial as well. If a man or woman has a high-earning job in the capital and has to leave from early morning till late at night, I think it compensates for not doing as much in the house (Andy, M)

In this ambivalent position, fathers can opt for two pathways. Ideological breadwinners find themselves in a supportive work environment and opt not to take parental leave for ideological reasons. Ideological explorers are fathers who do take parental leave despite their individual ideologies and explore new ways to use this time. The individual parenthood ideology also plays a role in the type of activities in which the leave-taking father is involved. Ideological explorers may use parental leave as well for activities that seem to be not related to childcare. This is opposite to fathers taking parental leave to perform an involved fathering role.

Doris: My first reaction (to Sid) was: Why do you take Tuesday and not Wednesday as a day off? But you (to Sid) are more practically minded because you are fixing things in the house while I would like to play with the kids on my day off (Doris to Sid, Ideological Explorer)

Ideological breadwinners, on the other hand cannot be convinced by the supportive meso-level to actually take up their entitled leave. Hence they stay at work and perform their breadwinning ideology by declining the possibility to take parental leave. These fathers take an individually motivated decision not to take up parental leave.
Viktor: It is good that there is something like parental leave for people who need it. Honestly, I am sometimes happy to be away to work during the day and don’t feel the necessity to stay longer at home. I really chose it myself (Viktor, M)

Empowered breadwinners

Empowered breadwinners are those parents who find themselves on both the micro- and the meso-level in the male breadwinning spectrum. They are similar to empowered parental leave takers as they feel resonance between micro- and meso-level, though the resonance is inflicted in a different way. Instead of resonance towards involved fatherhood, it exists towards the breadwinning attitude. They are mostly distinct to the other categories (apart from empowered breadwinners) as micro- and meso-level ideologies are not conflicting. Hence, there is no conflict. Conflict with partners may spark change, but given the homogeneity in values on a micro- as well as meso-level, individuals might be reassured about their positions as breadwinners. It is uncertain whether increased parental-leave has benefits, a transparent legal frame or more flexibility in parental-leave rules would convince those individuals to take parental leave. Instead, their individual parenthood ideology is performative and supported by expectations from the meso-level. Hence, they implement their fathering role based on the ideals of the male breadwinning ideology.

It might seem stereotypical, but for women it’s easier because the employer expects this and has more understanding about the situation. Therefore, men should remain at work during these early weeks. (Pete, M., Empowered breadwinner)

Discussion

Despite the rise of the dual-earner model, instigated by a rise in the female labour force, the taking of parental leave still shows a gendered picture (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015; Marynissen, Mussino, Wood, & Duvander, 2019; Wood & Marynissen, 2019). A legal entitlement to take up parental leave in itself seems insufficient to motivate fathers to take leave (Samtleben et al., 2019). The typology we introduce in this paper emphasises conflicts and synergies in parenthood ideologies on the individual micro-level and the interactional meso-level. The ideal types can be perceived as support for recurring findings of parental ideology determining the taking of parental leave (Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Twamley, 2021; Brandth & Kvande, 2016c; Oechsle, Müller & Ess, 2012).
The typology indicates that parents make decisions that are not only instigated by individual beliefs. Therefore, the typology can be seen as a social-cognitive model of decision making in which individuals do not only make decisions based on their own beliefs but are affected by meso-level ideologies as well. The societal expectations of employees can interfere with the individual decision making process (e.g. insecurities based on gender performance and expectations) or individual ideologies might conflict with workplace expectations resulting in inter-role strain (Petts, Carlson & Knoester, 2020; Natti, Anttila & Tammelin, 2011). The conflict that is perceived in several categories of the proposed typology may be problematic for many, especially for those who feel a hindrance to obtaining parental leave (ideological crusaders and ideological renegades).

Our results show that men experience an extra hurdle in receiving the benefits of the a legally entitled parental leave scheme on the meso-level. Concurring with Haas and Hwang (2019), who stated that “policies are not enough”, we were confronted with narratives of individuals feeling constraints on the interactional level, showing the normative barriers people encounter in workplaces. Instead of focusing solely on the workplace culture, we focused on synergies and conflicts on different levels. In this respect our results show that there is not only a group of men who are not able to perform their parenthood ideology due to workplace constraints, but there are also fathers for whom there is an individual ideological basis not to take parental leave and who would rather preserve such an entitlement for their partner. As Hojgaard (1997) argued, this is partially constructed by workplace expectations Some cases have shown that a supportive work-environment that was not matched with an individually involved parenthood ideology was related to other performed activities during the taking of leave, which were often not related to caring activities—for example, in the category of ideological explorers).

Conclusion

Our study concurred with the existing body of literature on indications of the impact of parenthood ideologies on male parental leave-taking on different levels (Glauber & Gozjolko, 2011; Humberd et al., 2015; Vespa, 2009). These ideologies are not limited to a single level but, similar to Hojgaard (1997), we found that contemporary fathers find themselves in a web of aligned as well as incompatible ideologies on different levels. In this respect, we innovated compared to earlier papers by focusing on the interactions (synergies and conflicts) on different levels. This was unlike the single focus on workplaces in papers by Haas and Hwang (2019) and Bloksgaard (2015) or on the individual level in papers by Brandth and Kvande
(2016c) or O’Brien and Wall (2017)) and also focused on the particular cases when individuals are supported in taking parental leave but have a breadwinner ideology on the individual level. This focus on both the individual micro level and the interactional meso-level in a typology of six ideal-type positions towards male parental leave that an individual can take: empowered parental leave takers, ideological crusaders, ideological renegades, ideological breadwinners, ideological explorers and empowered breadwinners.

Another contribution of our paper is the geographical region of this study. Many research papers on the ideological narratives behind parental leave focus on Nordic countries (e.g. Bloksgaard, 2015; Brandth & Kvande, 2016b; Duvander, Haas & Thalberg, 2017). Because Belgian policies are steering less towards parental leave than its Nordic counterparts, it is interesting to study the ideological nature behind parental leave on different levels (Saxonberg, 2013). Although the quantitative prevalence of parental leave has been documented greatly, our research helps in understanding partially why parental leave in Belgium is still gendered (Marynissen et al., 2019; Wood & Marynissen, 2019).

This typology raises new questions to take into consideration in future research and policy making. A vast amount of research shows how policy changes may increase the taking of parental leave (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2012) and that barriers can be moved by family friendly organizations (Brandth & Kvande, 2019b; Strachan & Burgess, 1998). An important finding in our study is that these levels are, at least in the Belgian context, only loosely connected. This means that policy intents can be counteracted on the micro- or the meso-level. Policies focused on males taking parental leave are effective only as long as they are perceived as a supportive. From the narratives of our interviewees, the meso-level has a particularly strong impact on the decision by males to take parental leave. Nonetheless, the examined subtypes were labelled as “ideological explorers”, “ideological breadwinners” or “supported breadwinners”. This labelling also shows that fathers sometimes do not identify as carers on an individual level. Hence, activities during leave can be performed differently. Therefore, researchers should take all three levels into account when studying parental leave and attempting to stimulate male leave-taking in the future.

Major limitations of our study are as follows: (I) we only used couple data instead of a combination with individual narratives regarding parental leave. This implies that there is a bias to be assumed, and participants might not fully express their intentions regarding parental leave if their partner was attending the interview. A design better suited to mapping partner dynamics would entail a combination of individual and couple interviews. (II) There is a
heteronormative bias in the results because we interviewed only heterosexual couples. (III)
The study population was homogeneous in socio-economic and ethnic characteristics, which
means that differences due to socio-economic or ethnic variations (e.g. financial strain, socio-
cultural ideals) remained unexplored. (IV) The topic list focussed only on a single topic rather
than various topics, and this did not allow us to exploit couple dynamics to fuller extent.

Whereas our understanding of the male taking of parental leave remains limited and
fragmented, our study connects different strands of literature and puts forward a framework
with the intent of integrating the knowledge of micro-level and meso-level ideologies. One of
the key messages of this article is that a single focus on policies, workplace culture (the meso-
level) or individual norms and values (micro-level) is insufficient to understanding the taking
parental leave due to the conflicts arising between different levels. Hence, lowering the hurdles
to taking parental leave potentially implies synergetic interventions between policy makers,
employer organizations and other agents in society, thereby promoting involved fathering.

References

The Influence of Organizational Family-Friendly Arrangements on the Duration of Employment

Bastaits, K., Ponnet, K., Van Peer, C., & Mortelmans, D. (2014). The parenting styles of
divorced fathers and their predictors. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 32*(5), 557-
579. doi:10.1177/0265407514541070


constructions among Danish fathers. *Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states. Comparing care
policies and practices, 141-162.

Bornstein, M. H., Haynes, O. M., Azuma, H., Galperín, C., Maital, S., Ogino, M., . . . Wright, B.
doi:10.1037//0012-1649.34.4.662


Smoktunowicz, E., Cieslak, R., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Interrole conflict and self-efficacy to manage work and family demands mediate the relationships of job and family demands with


Twamley, K. (2020). ‘She has mellowed me into the idea of SPL’: unpacking relational resources in UK couples’ discussions of Shared Parental Leave take-up. *Families, Relationships and Societies.*


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Pseudonymn</th>
<th>Age man</th>
<th>Job description</th>
<th>Female Pseudonymn</th>
<th>Age Woman</th>
<th>Job description</th>
<th>Amount of children</th>
<th>Age Youngest Child (in years)</th>
<th>Leave Male / Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buzz</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>Parental leave / No Parental Leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Laurie</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Supply Chain manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>pedagogue</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>Micky</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Parental leave / No parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No parental leave / Parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sid</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Warehouse Clerk</td>
<td>Doris</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>HR Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shane</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geri</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Unknown (Brewing company)</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental Leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>Bo</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>HR officer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colm</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Career consultant</td>
<td>Bryonie</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Adjunct CEO</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Parental leave / No parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neill</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Joni</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parental leave / No parental leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Department</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Parental Leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrisson</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Technician</td>
<td>Mayra</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Tutor</td>
<td>Parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Jessy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Parental leave / No parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Parental leave / parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>Parental leave / No parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Roofer</td>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>No parental leave / Parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicolas</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>No parental leave / Parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viktor</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Software consultant</td>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Education counselor</td>
<td>No parental leave / Parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Notary</td>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>Parental leave / Parental leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.